

John Singer Sargent's Alpine Sketchbooks

A Young Artist's Perspective



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A Young Artist's Perspective

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The Metropolitan Museum of Art
New York

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All illustrations in this book are from the sketchbook entitled *Splendid Mountain Watercolours*

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Foreword

The Metropolitan Museum of Art's aggregation of finished pictures and preparatory material by John Singer Sargent (1856–1925) forms the largest body of such work by a single artist in the Museum's extensive collection of American art. The Sargent collections, which comprise 455 accessioned objects, including 39 oils, 69 watercolors, 56 independent drawings, and 6 sketchbooks, cover the entire range of the artist's career and offer a rich source for study. The Museum was fortunate when Stephen D. Rubin came to us in the Department of American Paintings as a graduate intern in 1987; shortly thereafter he joined the staff as a research associate.

Mr. Rubin's primary undertaking was the study of our Sargent holdings, especially the two youthful sketchbooks presented here, as they had not yet received thorough conservation or scholarly attention. Commencing the project under the guidance of Doreen Bolger, then the Museum's curator of American Paintings and Sculpture and now curator of Paintings and Sculpture at the Amon Carter Museum in Fort Worth, Texas, Mr. Rubin was joined by Marjorie Shelley, conservator of works on paper at the Metropolitan. Ms. Shelley performed the conservation work necessary to ensure the proper preservation and display of the

sketchbook pages, which had become unbound. Meticulous inspection of this material by Mr. Rubin and Ms. Shelley made it possible to determine the original arrangement and order of the pages, a major accomplishment. From this investigation and from Mr. Rubin's diligent scholarship (which involved, among other things, his retracing Sargent's footsteps through the Bernese Oberland and the Pennine Alps) have come this publication and its accompanying exhibition, which add much to our knowledge and enjoyment of Sargent's work.

Stephen D. Rubin died tragically, suddenly, on October 31 of this year, while he was at the Museum completing arrangements for the exhibition. Because of his admirable habit of careful preparation, both the publication and exhibition have been able to reach completion, the latter under the timely guidance of Carrie Rebora, assistant curator of American Paintings and Sculpture and manager of The Henry R. Luce Center for the Study of American Art. This publication will stand as a fitting and lasting memorial to Stephen D. Rubin, a dear friend and valued colleague.

John K. Howat

*Lawrence A. Fleischman Chairman of the
Departments of American Art*

Preface

John Singer Sargent's two Alpine sketchbooks of 1870, drawn and painted when he was fourteen years old, were donated to The Metropolitan Museum of Art by the artist's sister, Mrs. Francis Ormond. They represent a small portion of an extremely generous gift of Sargent material consisting of 24 oil paintings, 120 watercolors, hundreds of miscellaneous drawings, and several albums of photographs and sketches. In 1949 Mrs. Ormond decided to sell her house in London, where for years she had stored much of her brother's work, and in November addressed an inquiry to her distant relative Francis Henry Taylor, then director of the Metropolitan Museum. "My dear Cousin Francis," she wrote, "I have a quantity of sketches, studies, some water colours and some drawings by my brother. I should like to give them all to you, to dispose of as you see fit." Mr. Taylor, on behalf of the Museum, was delighted to accept Mrs. Ormond's offer, and in April of 1950 the Sargent material was delivered, packaged in two suitcases, one parcel, and a portfolio.

The larger of the two Alpine sketchbooks, the one inscribed *Splendid Mountain Watercolours* on a label affixed to the cover, was in total disorder when it arrived. The pages had become separated from the original binding and had been replaced in the album, apparently at random. Fortunately, the smaller sketchbook (*Album No. 3*) was still

virtually intact with only two sheets slit out of the binding and set at the back of the album with three other unrelated sheets taken from other sketchbooks.

In 1988 the task of cataloguing, collating, and conserving the forty-seven pages of *Splendid Mountain Watercolours* was begun. In addition to landscape views that had been executed directly on the sketchbook's pages in watercolor, graphite, or black crayon, fourteen associated watercolors of landscape, portrait, and genre subjects had been pasted into the album. Clearly, Sargent had been working concurrently on individual pads of artist's paper as well as in the two sketchbooks. He appears to have used the smaller of the two sketchbooks to record the first part of a trip made by the Sargent family in Switzerland during the summer of 1870. When they reached Thun, Sargent and his father began a walking tour, on which he started using the larger sketchbook, *Splendid Mountain Watercolours*. After they arrived in the village of Mürren, he worked on both books, as well as using separate sheets.

Sargent dated many of the pages and identified a number of sites, making it appear that the sketchbooks were a chronological, pictorial record of the journey through Switzerland. In addition to the clues furnished by Sargent's inscriptions, the large sketchbook contained much physical evidence that proved useful in

ordering the pages. Many of the graphite and black crayon sketches had left an offset, or counterproof, on the back of the preceding page. The matching of stains and spots of paint to similar blemishes on other sheets also helped in establishing the correct order.

As the project of restoring the larger sketchbook progressed, the search for information widened. Three sheets in the Fogg Art Museum, one in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and three in private collections were identified as once having belonged to it. One sketchbook sheet was found in the portfolio Mrs. Ormond had given to the Museum. Two of the Fogg watercolors—*The Matterhorn, 1870* and *Merjelen See, 1870*—had been included among the “six early drawings done at the age of 14–16” that were exhibited in the Sargent memorial exhibition at the Royal Academy, London, in 1926. Sargent’s heirs had evidently begun to remove pages from the sketchbook soon after the artist’s death.

Confirmation of the itinerary suggested by the sketchbooks was provided by two unpublished letters written by Dr. FitzWilliam Sargent, the artist’s father, to his friend George Bemis. In these letters Dr. Sargent sets forth in detail the tour taken by the Sargent family in Switzerland during the summer of 1870. Other letters from Dr. Sargent, dated 1870 and addressed to his parents and siblings, document the concerns and activities of his family during that period and offer striking verbal counterparts to the drawings in the sketchbooks. Mrs. Francis Ormond, the donor of the albums, figures prominently in these letters as the newborn baby who, along with her wet nurse, accompanied her family on the summer’s excursion.

It is the fortuitous conjunction of Dr. Sargent’s letters with his son’s charming, precocious sketchbooks that brings John Singer Sargent’s remarkable early accomplishments so vividly to life.

John Singer Sargent's Alpine Sketchbooks

During the summer months of 1870 John Singer Sargent, at the age of fourteen, traveled through Switzerland with his parents and two sisters. In order to escape the hot, unhealthy atmosphere of a summer in Florence, their current residence, the Sargents retreated to the cool, restorative climate of the Swiss Alps. On this journey the young John Sargent filled two sketchbooks with drawings that enabled him to gain his parents' approval to pursue a career as an artist.¹ During the fall of 1870, after the family returned to Florence, the artist's father wrote to his own mother announcing the family's decision about young John's future.

My boy John seems to have a strong desire to be an Artist by profession, a painter, he shows so much evidence of talent in that direction, and takes so much pleasure in cultivating it, that we have concluded to gratify him and to keep that plan in view in his studies.²

The Sargent family's obsessive concern with climate and its effect on their health determined their yearly itinerary and created one of the few patterns in what might otherwise be described as an aimless nomadic existence. Thus, it was customary during the summer, when cholera and malaria were prevalent, for them to take refuge in the mountains, and to go south in the winter to

avoid bronchitis and rheumatism.

During Sargent's boyhood in the 1860s, the family's preferred summer destination was Switzerland—such picturesque locales as Saint-Moritz, a spa in the Engadine region, or Clarens and Rossinière, pretty villages near Lake Geneva. These Swiss peregrinations also included occasional visits to scenic locations in the neighboring French Alps of the Haute-Savoie.

According to letters written by Dr. FitzWilliam Sargent, the boy's father, these "summer campaigns" among the Alpine lakes and mountains were often idyllic interludes in which his invalid daughter, Emily, could gain strength participating in farmyard chores, while John, her more robust brother, undertook long, challenging hikes to the tops of nearby peaks, returning home "as brisk as a bee."³

The year 1870 opened with the Sargent family in residence at 4 via Solferino in Florence, where they had moved the preceding fall from Rome. Dr. Sargent and his wife, née Mary Newbold Singer, were American expatriates who had traveled to Europe in 1854, ostensibly to seek a more suitable climate for the recovery of Mrs. Sargent's health. Except for infrequent visits to relatives in Philadelphia and Boston, they never returned to live in America. Once the Sargents had established themselves in Europe, Dr. Sargent gave up his career as a surgeon, and the

family became dependent on the modest income earned by his wife's investments. Acceptable expenses seem to have included constant travel but not the substantial outlay required for permanent quarters. With no established family residence, home was invariably a rented apartment or house, which was frequently changed for reasons of economy, health, or simple wanderlust. The fact that John Sargent's family led a nomadic life, however, does not mean that the boy did not have a home. His home—his emotional center—was the family itself, a tightly knit, devoted circle that was both insular and self-sufficient. The Sargents had only a few friends, and those were expatriates like themselves with similarly vague itineraries.

Although they had chosen to reside in Europe, Dr. and Mrs. Sargent did not perceive themselves as any less American. Through frequent exchanges of letters and photographs, they maintained strong ties with their relatives in America and, in their wanderings through Europe, they associated almost exclusively with fellow Americans. Dr. Sargent took an interest in American politics, pleasure in "American chat," and pride in the American flag. Holding steadfast to his American manner of speaking, he was pleased not to belong "to the humbug variety of Americans," who after a year or two abroad spoke English with a French accent.⁴ In an effort to instill

national pride in their children, the Sargents celebrated the American holiday of Thanksgiving. Although young John Sargent had not as yet visited America, he was described by the artist Edwin Blashfield "as a slender American-looking lad."⁵

Life in Florence was not unfamiliar to Dr. Sargent and his wife; in fact, they had been living there on January 12, 1856, when John was born. In January of 1870 Mary Sargent, pregnant again, was fretting over the prospects of her imminent confinement. She wrote, "I am expecting a little Florentine every day, now, and with more than the accustomed dread of such an arrival, having been more than usually suffering for the last few months."⁶ Contrary to her fears for herself and her unborn child—three of her children had died very young—a healthy baby girl was born on February 9. Mrs. Sargent's speedy recovery and the care of the new baby, designated by her father as "the most important member of our household," were the major focus of family concerns during the months that preceded the summer journey.

Although the subject of Mrs. Sargent's health, her hypochondriacal preoccupations with sore throats and coughs, and her astonishing propensity for catching cold are recurring themes in her husband's letters, it was Dr. Sargent himself who had been seriously ill for two years. Since 1868 he had complained of a debilitating illness and attacks of dizziness arising from indigestion, which had rendered him utterly helpless. By 1870, however, after having drunk the curative mineral waters at various French and Swiss spas, given up smoking, and greatly restricted his diet, FitzWilliam Sargent reported that he suffered less severely from indigestion and its attendant vertigo. As of May, he was able to write, "I am much better than I was, although deficient in strength as compared to former times, and I am very thin."⁷ No less than a month later, at the age of fifty, the former invalid would undertake a course of strenuous exercise, hiking with his son, John, for long hours over difficult terrain among



Sketch of Mrs. Sargent
drawn by her son, about
1870

the vertiginous peaks of the Bernese Oberland.

The arrival of the new baby in 1870 delighted John and Emily, who were “very happy at having a new plaything in the house.”⁸ However, their attention was directed primarily to school, where they pursued their studies diligently. Attending school was a novel experience for the Sargent children. Except for a few weeks in 1868, when John attended a small school run by an Englishman at Nice, the children had been educated at home by their father. Dr. Sargent took his responsibilities as preceptor with utmost seriousness; he proved both a gentle and understanding schoolmaster.

I find that it requires a considerable amount of patience to teach children, to say nothing of the quality of knowledge needed on the part of the teacher. I have got them on pretty well in Geography and Arithmetic, and they are also studying History and Spelling. It seems to me better not to crowd them with too many subjects for study. . . . I think it more important to lay in a store of health and strength, so far as possible, then to endeavor to force them to know a great deal.⁹

Their mother insisted they spend as much of the day as possible out of doors; consequently, they studied with their father in the evening. Dr. Sargent’s letters to his parents in America are filled with charming references to the children’s difficulties and successes in learning rudimentary skills. “I am just now trying to make Johnny comprehend the mystery of a sum in simple division: but it tries his little soul wonderfully. However, we must persevere.”¹⁰

FitzWilliam Sargent’s misgivings about assuming full responsibility for his children’s education reached a critical stage in 1869, when he wrote to his sister, “I wish I was near a good school for boys, for my boy is now thirteen years old and is tolerably advanced in ignorance. I shall have to pack him off from us soon to some good school somewhere, for I am quite anxious that he should begin to study systematically and thoroughly; he will have to go to England or to



Dr. Sargent, drawn by his son, about 1870

Germany, I presume.”¹¹ Although Dr. Sargent thought it a pity that John should not enjoy the benefits of a good school, his wife dreaded “the idea of sending her first born son away from her.”¹² A compromise was struck and in the winter of 1869–70, John was enrolled in M. Joseph Domengé’s day school in Florence, where he read Horace and worked “his way through Geometry, and Algebra, besides German, French etc. etc.”¹³

Dr. Sargent need not have doubted the quality of his son’s education, for John’s remarkable early accomplishments were a credit both to his father’s teaching skills and to his mother’s cultivated interests. As reported by Violet Paget, a childhood friend of the artist, the titles of the books that John read in Rome during the winter of 1868–69 resonate with high seriousness. They include such works as Wilhelm Becker’s *Gallus, or Roman Scenes of the Time of Augustus with Notes and Excursuses Illustrative of the Manner and Customs of the Romans*, Sir William Smith’s *Smaller Dictionary of Antiquities*, Jean-Jacques Ampère’s *L’Histoire romaine à Rome*, and Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *Marble Faun*—sophisticated reading indeed for a thirteen-year-old. Paget, who became a well-known literary figure under the pen name of Vernon Lee, recalled a discussion held a year later in which she and John conversed

earnestly on elevated topics, debating “the merits of Canova versus the Antique and Guido Reni compared with Rafael: and . . . read once more the extracts from *Childe Harold* in the guide book.”¹⁴

Although neither parent made mention in their letters of John’s musical accomplishments, their son had developed into a skilled pianist, who as a young adolescent played works by Mendelssohn, Beethoven, and Schubert. In later life music became one of his chief pleasures, and his profound musicality was admired by professional musicians. The famed violinist and concertmaster Joseph Joachim is reputed to have said, “Had Sargent taken to music instead of painting he would have been as great a musician as he was a painter.”¹⁵

Not only was the fourteen-year-old Sargent a paragon of literary sophistication and musical skill, but he also demonstrated remarkable capabilities as a draftsman. In a letter of March 1, 1870, FitzWilliam Sargent wrote, “Drawing seems to be his favorite occupation and I think he has the elements of a good artist in him.”¹⁶ As his father’s letters confirm, John showed an overwhelming predilection for drawing, even at the tender age of five. “Johnny is well and as fond as ever of drawing. I send you a drawing of a bunch of Johnny-Jump-Ups which he took from nature the other day.”¹⁷ As a child, John was inspired not only by nature but also by picture books and illustrated periodicals, such as *The Illustrated London News* and the satirical British magazine *Punch*. Examples still survive of his son’s juvenile work, which Dr. Sargent had sent home to America for the admiring eyes of fond grandparents.¹⁸

Letters written by the nine-year-old Sargent to a boyhood friend, Ben Castillo, about visits to museums, cathedrals, and zoological gardens reveal keen powers of observation and a lively manner of expression. The many sketches he mentioned having drawn at these sites indicate that he was already confirmed in his use of the sketchbook as a visual journal to record what he saw.¹⁹

While Dr. Sargent taught his son the rudiments of knowledge, his mother, according to most Sargent biographers, was the one who guided him in his efforts to draw and paint in watercolor. An enthusiastic watercolorist herself, she was remembered by Vernon Lee in the following manner:

[I] see in recollection Mrs. Sargent painting, painting away, always an open paint-box in front of her, through all the forty years I knew her, her whole jocund personality splashed, as it were, with the indigo of seas and the carmine of sunsets, to me the painting gift of John Sargent is all from his mother.²⁰

The Metropolitan Museum of Art owns two of Mrs. Sargent’s albums, which date from 1904 and contain drawings and watercolors of Greece and the Near East. The crude drawing style, incorrect perspective, and inept use of watercolor technique evident in these sketchbooks reveal her to have been a rank amateur. Clearly, Sargent’s skill at fourteen, as demonstrated in the two Swiss sketchbooks, far exceeded his mother’s meager accomplishments. She encouraged her son and was one of the first to recognize his talents, but she certainly could not have served long as his teacher.

In a letter dated October 20, 1867, Mary wrote that John had not as yet received any formal art training:

Johnnie is growing to be such a nice boy, and is getting old enough to enjoy and appreciate the beauties of nature and art which are so lavishly displayed in these old lands. He sketches quite nicely & has a remarkably quick and correct eye. If we could afford to give him really good lessons, he would soon be quite a little artist. Thus far he has never had any instruction, but artists say that his touch is remarkable.²¹

It has not been determined with absolute certainty who gave John his first professional art lessons and what the nature and extent of his early training was before the summer of 1870. The first mention of the boy’s having received

professional instruction in drawing appears in Evan Charteris's book *John Sargent* (1927), one of the earliest published biographies of the artist. According to Charteris, Sargent met Joseph Farquharson, a Scottish landscape painter, in the Swiss village of Mürren during the summer of 1868. Impressed by the boy's talent, Farquharson was said to have given him his first lessons in portrait drawing.²² A careful study of Dr. Sargent's letters reveals that the family was not, in fact, in Mürren during this period. According to the detailed itinerary, which can be reconstructed from a chronological reading of the correspondence, they were visiting spas in the Pyrenees at that time, far from the Swiss Alps.

Farquharson's friendship and his offer of instruction are more likely to date from 1870, two years later, when the Sargents did indeed spend the month of August in Mürren. Portraits of residents of Mürren in native dress are depicted in the Swiss sketchbooks of that year and may have been the subjects the young artist drew under Farquharson's tutelage.

Charteris also records that young John received instruction in watercolor in Rome during the winter of 1868–69 from Carl Welsch, a German-American landscape painter, who remarked on the boy's aptitude for drawing and invited him to work in his studio, copying his watercolors.²³ This episode in Sargent's artistic development, however, is not mentioned by Vernon Lee, who described that winter in Rome in great detail, nor by Dr. Sargent, who wrote numerous letters during the same period. Despite the lack of corroborating evidence, however, it is likely that John did study with Welsch that winter. Welsch lived in Rome at the time and was an acquaintance of the Sargent family;²⁴ he also accompanied the boy on a sketching tour in the Tyrol in the summer of 1871.

If John had no more than a winter of instruction from Carl Welsch, how is it possible to account for the skill and sophistication evident in the remarkable watercolors and drawings found in the Swiss sketchbooks of 1870? The most



obvious explanation must lie in the young Sargent's abundant innate ability. In addition, his mother, an inveterate sightseer, enthusiastically conducted him through numerous museums, cathedrals, and palaces,²⁵ and his early letters are filled with descriptions of works of art. At the South Kensington Museum in London—now the Victoria and Albert—he admired the paintings of Edwin Landseer and *The Horse Fair* by Rosa Bonheur. After a visit to the Musée de Cluny in Paris, John remarked upon the display of stone tools made by cave dwellers, and he found “the Museum of Naples very fine and more interesting than either the Capitol or Vatican in Rome, because all the bronzes and frescoes from Pompeii and Herculaneum are there.”²⁶ John's early sketches of Greco-Roman and Neoclassical sculpture in the Vatican are to be found in an 1868/69 sketchbook in the collection of the Fogg Art Museum (1937.7.1). Other drawings after the antique, in particular the celebrated *Sleeping Faun* from the Glyptothek in Munich, are included in an 1869 album in the Metropolitan Museum's collection. Sargent's intense exposure to Euro-

Sleeping Faun in the Glyptothek, Munich, drawn by John Sargent in 1869

pean culture during his formative years obviously provided him with a rich background in the arts and afforded him an ideal opportunity to develop a discerning eye.

John Sargent's early knowledge of drawing and understanding of watercolor practice could have resulted from his study of instruction manuals, which proliferated during the nineteenth century. Written for amateurs, these books encouraged the beginner to draw from the works of the great masters and emphasized the copying of Greco-Roman statuary. They provided step-by-step information about how to draw and paint in watercolor, reflecting the increasing popularity of the medium among amateurs and artists alike. The market for instructional drawing books

appears to have been inexhaustible, as many of these books were reprinted frequently.²⁷ John Ruskin's popular book *The Elements of Drawing*, for example, was reprinted four times between 1857 and 1861. Interestingly, Ruskin did not recommend his manual or any formal art training for children under the age of twelve or fourteen.²⁸ Although there is no evidence that the Sargents actually owned any of the manuals, it is highly likely, given the cultivated atmosphere of their household, that they were made available to the boy, whose aptitude and early passion for drawing and painting cannot be exaggerated, as the examples from his early sketchbooks reproduced in the following pages so amply demonstrate.

Travels Begin

FitzWilliam Sargent clearly described the itinerary that his family followed during the summer of 1870 in a letter written the following October to his best friend and fellow expatriate, George Bemis:

We spent our summer in Switzerland, whither we went soon after you left us at Venice. . . . We crossed the St. Gotthard to Fluelen—thence to Berne & Thun. From Thun John & I, after incubating three weeks, hatched a three weeks walk amongst the Mountains & Glaciers—going over the Gemmi to Zermatt & the Riffelberg, to the Aggishorn, the Rhone Glacier, the Grimsel, Meiringen etc etc etc to Interlaken, where we found the rest of the family. After spending a fortnight, or more, at Interlaken we all went to Mürren (above Lauterbrunnen) where we passed the month of August . . . thence we went to Grindelwald, from which we made some excursions; then over the Brünig to Lucerne where we spent a fortnight . . . And now here [Florence] we are for the winter.

Although the Sargents had determined that the Bernese Oberland would be their destination for the summer's campaign, they had no set schedule. The external factor that played the most significant role in determining their choice of locale was, as usual, temperature. Unhurried and self-absorbed, the Sargents evaluated their health requirements and the weather and ventured forth accordingly.

In was very hot in Florence in the early part of

May when Dr. and Mrs. Sargent and their children—John, Emily, and the still-unnamed baby—departed on the overnight train for Venice. They carried with them a gift from George Bemis, one of Murray's *Handbooks for Travellers*, a series of guide books popular with English tourists during the last half of the nineteenth century.

The Sargents arrived in Venice on May 10 and rented rooms on the Riva degli Schiavoni, from which they could see gondolas and large boats with many-colored sails. Dr. Sargent remarked in a letter to Bemis, "Venice looks a little older and somewhat more seedy than it did to me fourteen years ago."

Despite the unseasonable weather ("Venice nearly killed us, it was so awfully hot"), the Sargents remained there for two weeks, during which time they purchased the smaller of the two Alpine sketchbooks. This was John's first visit to Venice, a city that would inspire some of his finest work. Year after year he returned to paint the numerous, haunting genre scenes and strikingly composed architectural views for which he would later become so well known.

After May 23 the Sargents retreated from Venice to the cooler climate of Lago Maggiore, where they spent a week. During this time the future Mrs. Ormond was finally baptized under the name of Violet Sargent. By June 3 they were crossing the St. Gotthard pass in a diligence, a large, public horse-drawn carriage, on their way to the mountains and glaciers of the Oberland.



Devil's Bridge, St. Gotthard, June 4



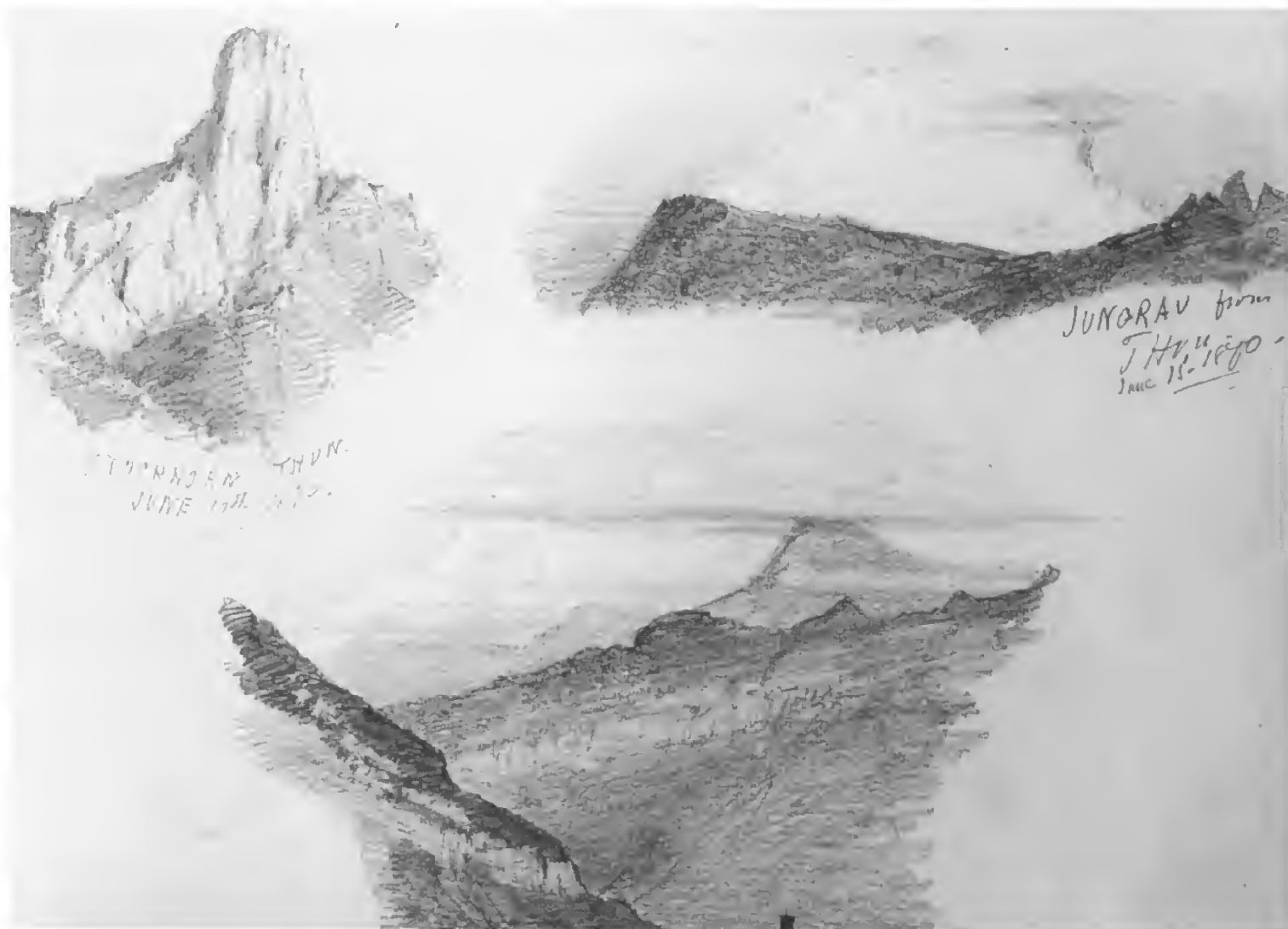
Uri Rothstock from Brunnen, June 5

The original structure of the famous Devil's Bridge, seen in the foreground of Sargent's watercolor, was washed away by a flood in 1888. The bridge had been built in the narrow Schollenen Gorge, whose lofty, almost perpendicular granite cliffs rise sharply from the swiftly flowing Reuss River.



Lion monument, Lucerne, June 5

Lucerne's lion monument, drawn with accuracy by Sargent, was designed by the Danish sculptor Albert Thorvaldsen (1770–1844) to commemorate the officers and men of the Swiss Guards who died while defending Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette during the French Revolution. The statue, of heroic proportions, was carved into the living rock of a quarry wall in 1821.



Three landscape vignettes: Stockhorn, Thun (June 10), and Jungfrau from Thun (June 15)

"We are staying at Thun, near the pretty lake of the same name, and in sight of several snow-covered mountains 12000 ft. high so that when we feel very uncomfortably warm, we turn our eyes and thoughts to those icy summits, and fancy ourselves reinvigorated by the look and the thought. We shall be obliged to locate ourselves higher soon, on Emily's account, as she is so much benefited by high air in warm weather." (FitzWilliam Sargent to Winthrop Sargent, June 21, 1870)



Two views from
Kandersteg, June 30:
(above) entrance to the
Gasterthal; (below) the
Kanderthal as seen from
the Hotel Gemmi

Kandersteg, a picturesque village located high in the mountains of the Bernese Oberland, was an overnight station on the first leg of the "pedestrian excursion" undertaken by John Sargent and his father. The village is at the north end of the Gemmi Pass, a major north-south route connecting the cantons of Berne and Valais. The Gasterthal is a lateral branch of the Kander Valley.



Kandersteg from the
gorge of the Gasternthal



The Gemmi Pass, July 1



Loèche-les-Bains, July 2

"We went over the Gemmi, from Thun to the Hotel near the top of the pass we had fine weather, and the night we spent at the Inn was bright & promising; but before daylight a snow-storm began, & we crossed to Loèche in a mixture of snow & rain. This was the only bad weather we had during . . . our tour." (FitzWilliam Sargent to George Bemis, August 8, 1873?)



The Matterhorn from Zmutt Glacier, Zermatt



Monte Rosa from Hörnli, Zermatt

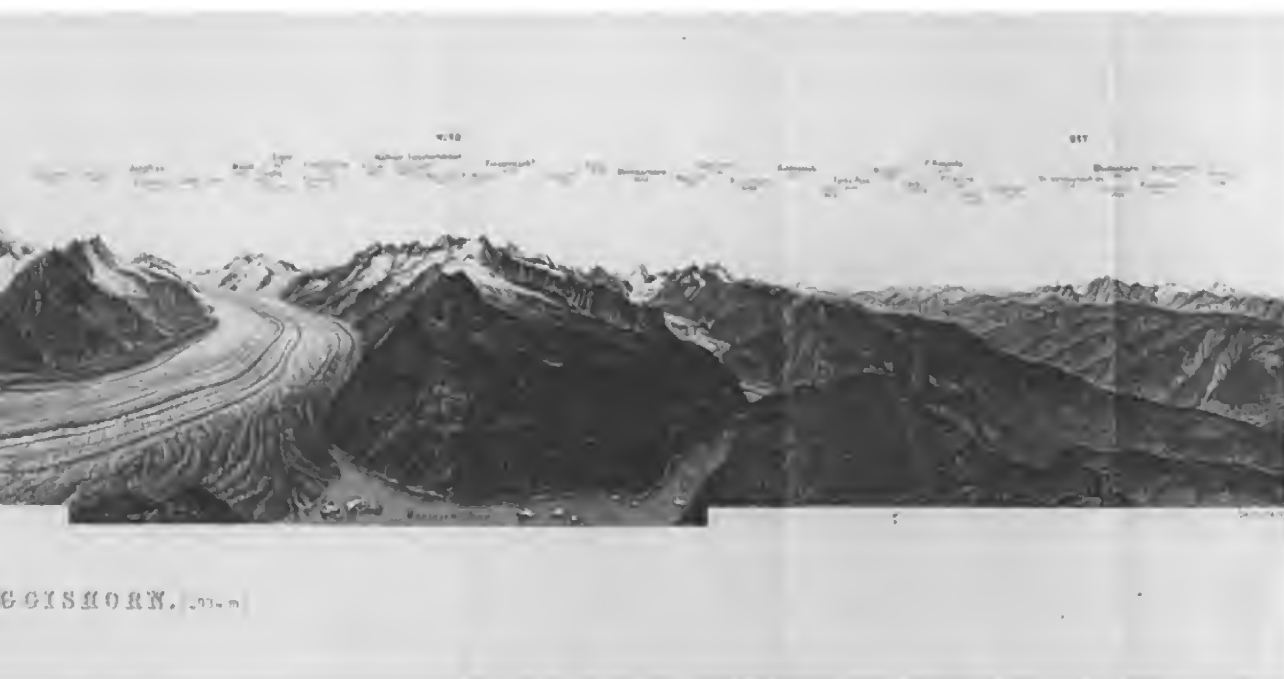


Aletsch Glacier from
Eggishorn, July 10



Panorama from
Eggishorn (from K.
Baedeker's *Switzerland:
Handbook for Travellers*)

"At the Bel-Alp opposite Brieg, I think, we met Prof. Tyndall who was recruiting [recovering] after an attack of illness or an accident. The Inn is quite comfortable there, and if you feel inclined to visit the largest glacier in Europe, you can easily do so from the Bel-Alp—the Aletsch glacier—an easy walk. The Aggishorn [sic] hotel is also a tolerably comfortable inn, with a fine view from the summit." (FitzWilliam Sargent to George Bemis, August 8, 1873?)



The panorama from Eggishorn taken from Baedeker's guide to Switzerland clearly demonstrates that Sargent was familiar with contemporary travel books. John Tyndall (1820–93) was a famous Alpinist who competed unsuccessfully with Edward Whymper in the race to be the first mountaineer to conquer the Matterhorn.



Rhone Glacier, July 13

In 1870, when Sargent depicted the Rhone Glacier, the river of ice was one of the most impressive glaciers in Switzerland. Today the glacier has retreated from the position shown here.

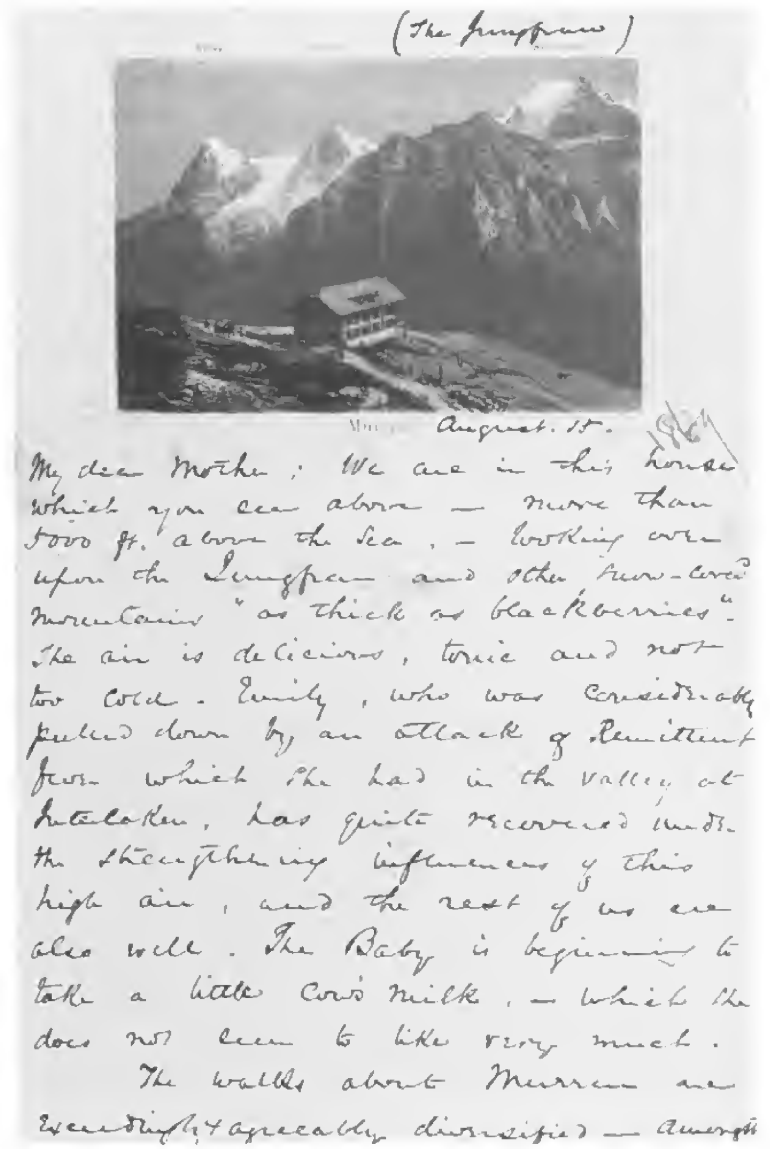




“Regardez moi ça” (Mrs. Sargent)



Aubergines (young women sketching)



Letter from Dr. Sargent from Mürren, August 15

"We are in this house which you see above—more than 5000 ft. above the sea,—looking over upon the Jungfrau and other snow-covered mountains "as thick as blackberries." The air is delicious, tonic and not too cold. . . . The walks about Mürren are exceedingly and agreeably diversified—amongst pines, rocks, tumbling streams and waterfalls, looking across gorges upon glaciers and mountains 12000 ft. high eternally covered with snow and ice, from which avalanches roll and thunder daily." (FitzWilliam Sargent to Emily Haskell Sargent, August 15, 1870)



Eiger, Mürren, August 3

"We all went to Mürren . . . where we passed the month of August in the clouds & fogs & rain, varied with transient sunshine which, like the rainbow to Noah, gave us the hope that the rain would not last for ever and ever Amen."
(FitzWilliam Sargent to George Bemis, October 15, 1870)



View of the Eiger from
Mürren, August 3



Gottlieb Feutz, Mürren



Interior with elderly couple, Mürren

Way up to Faulhorn
(Bachalpsee)



From the Faulhorn,
September 3



"I should add to the above catalogue [of agreeable excursions] the Ascent of the Faulhorn from Grindelwald—which gives a most deliciously grand view of the Oberland peaks. You are a horseman and if you have not ascended the Faulhorn, you would be well repaid, if the weather should favor you. . . . How impressive is the effect of night gradually stealing over such a landscape as that one sees from the Faulhorn!—more impressive than the morning view, I think. I should immensely enjoy repeating my visit to that region." (FitzWilliam Sargent to George Bemis, August 8, 1873?)





Shreckhorn, Eismeer



Eismeer, Grindelwald



Wellhorn and Wetterhorn

At the age of fourteen, Sargent was not prone to exaggeration or flights of artistic fancy; his primary interest lay in learning how to record with precision the world about him. A comparison of Sargent's rendering of the Wellhorn and the Wetterhorn with a contemporary photograph of the same view demonstrates the young artist's ability to transcribe the details of a landscape setting with great accuracy and clarity.



Photograph of the Rosenlaui

Zur Gilgen Haus,
Lucerne



From Pilatus





Hotel Bellevue and the Esel Peak, Mount Pilatus

"John & I made a splendid and never-to-be-forgotten ascent of Pilatus (overnighting there and seeing the sun rise at 6 o'clock one morning—

"Nor dim, nor red-

Like God's own head

The glorious sun uprist,"

out of a sea of clouds which tossed in mountainous masses against the grey rocks, of which a few shot out their snow-capped summits from out the white oceans." (FitzWilliam Sargent to George Bemis, October 15, 1870)



Night by Michelangelo, San Lorenzo, Florence

By October 3, the Sargents had returned to Florence where John continued his education by making sketches after famous works of art, in this case Michelangelo's Night.

My boy John seems to have a strong desire to be an Artist by profession, a painter, and he shows so much evidence of talent in that direction, and takes so much pleasure in cultivating it, that we have concluded to gratify him, and to keep that plan in view in his studies. He goes to school here to a Frenchman who looks after his few pupils very carefully, makes them study hard and carefully and at the same time wins their respect and affection, — a combined result which few teachers gain, according to my experience. He (the boy) is growing well and enjoys good health and is a good boy withal. Emily would delight you, I am sure, with her gentleness and amiability and the marked religious spirit which she manifests. The children & Mary send their best love to you and Pa, Uncles Aunts and Cousins, as do I, and I am always, my dearest Mother, most affectionately yours F.W. Sargent

Letter from Dr. Sargent, October 10, 1870

"My boy John seems to have a strong desire to be an Artist by profession, a painter, and he shows so much evidence of talent in that direction, and takes so much pleasure in cultivating it, that we have concluded to gratify him and to keep that plan in view in his studies. He goes to school here to a Frenchman who looks after his few pupils very carefully, makes them study hard and carefully and at the same time wins their respect and affection, — a combined result which few teachers gain, according to my experience. He (the boy) is growing well and enjoys good health and is a good boy withal. Emily would delight you, I am sure, with her gentleness and amiability and the marked religious spirit which she manifests. The children and Mary send their best love to you and Pa, Uncles Aunts and Cousins, as do I, and I am always, my dearest Mother, most affectionately yours, F.W. Sargent

Notes

Abbreviations

AAA —Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. (repository of the FitzWilliam Sargent papers)

Charteris —Evan Charteris, *John Sargent*. New York, 1927

FWS —FitzWilliam Sargent

MHS —Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston (repository of the George Bemis papers)

VL —Vernon Lee (Violet Paget), *J.S.S.: In Memoriam*, reprinted in Charteris

1. John Singer Sargent (1856–1925), *Splendid Mountain Watercolours*, 1870. Album containing 48 leaves. Watercolor, gouache, black wax crayon, and graphite on off-white wove paper, 10 5/8 x 15 1/8 in. Gift of Mrs. Francis Ormond, 1950 (50.130.146). *Album No. 3, Switzerland, 1870*, containing 39 leaves, 1870. Watercolor, gouache, and graphite on off-white wove paper, 7 3/4 x 10 7/8 in. Gift of Mrs. Francis Ormond, 1950 (50.130.148).
2. FWS/Emily Haskell Sargent, Oct. 10 [1870], AAA. Vernon Lee and Evan Charteris, both early biographers of Sargent, concluded that the important decision pertaining to Sargent's career was made in Rome during the winter of 1868–69. Like much decision making in the Sargent family, however, the process was likely to have been a protracted one, initiated in Rome and concluded almost two years later in the fall of 1870. The letter of Oct. 10 contains the first reference in Dr. Sargent's voluminous correspondence to his and his wife's decision to approve their son's choice of career.
3. FWS/Winthrop Sargent, Sept. 15, 1869, AAA.
4. FWS/George Bemis, Aug. 20, 1865, MHS.
5. Edwin Howland Blashfield, "John Singer Sargent," 1925, reprinted in *Commemorative Tributes of the American Academy of Arts and Letters: 1905–1941* (New York: 1942), p. 185.
6. Mary Singer Sargent/Emily Haskell Sargent, Jan. 19, 1870, AAA.
7. FWS/[Emily Haskell Sargent], [May 1870], AAA.
8. FWS/Winthrop Sargent, March 1 [1870], AAA.
9. FWS/Winthrop Sargent, June 18, 1866, AAA.
10. FWS/Emily Haskell Sargent, Nov. 28, 1864, AAA.
11. FWS/sister, May 10, 1869, continued Sept. 20, AAA.
12. FWS/Emily Haskell Sargent, Oct. 18 [1869], AAA.
13. FWS/Winthrop Sargent, March 1 [1870], AAA.
14. VL, pp. 247–48.
15. As quoted in Charteris, p. 147.
16. FWS/Winthrop Sargent, March 1 [1870], AAA.
17. FWS/Emily Haskell Sargent, Sept. 21, 1861, AAA.
18. Four of these drawings bearing dates between 1860 and 1865 are in the Sargent Murray Gilman Hough House, Gloucester, Mass.
19. John Singer Sargent/Ben Castillo, Oct. 13, 1865, in Charteris, p. 9.
20. VL, p. 235.
21. Mary Singer Sargent/Emily Haskell Sargent, Oct. 20, 1867, AAA.
22. Charteris, p. 10.
23. Ibid.
24. In two of his letters Dr. Sargent mentions Welsch by name. See FWS/George Bemis, March 31 [1874], MHS, and FWS/George Bemis, Feb. 2 [1875], MHS.
25. For a description of Mrs. Sargent's enthusiasm for sightseeing, see Vernon Lee, *The Sentimental Traveller: Notes on Places* (London/New York, 1908), pp. 10–14.
26. Charteris, p. 12.
27. For a detailed discussion of instruction manuals, see Peter Beckness, "Introduction," in *Gilpin to Ruskin: Drawing Masters and Their Manuals, 1800–1860*. Exhib. cat., Fitzwilliam Museum (Cambridge, 1987–88), pp. 7–14.
28. John Ruskin, *The Elements of Drawing* (reprinted, New York, 1971), p. 9.

